

Good Intentions

Many Mainers Plan to Go to College, but Don't

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There is a growing gap between Maine high school graduates' "college intentions" and their actual college enrollment, according to a recent study by the Senator George J. Mitchell Scholarship Research Institute.

A follow-up to a similar study the institute conducted five years ago, the new research is based on enrollment data from colleges and Maine public high schools, surveys of more than 3,000 Maine parents, students, young adults and educators and group interviews in 19 high schools around the state.

The researchers were surprised to learn that despite steady increases in the proportion of graduating seniors planning to enroll in college, actual college enrollment stayed flat in the first part of this decade, then began to decline. In 2001, 64 percent of Maine's high school graduating class reported intentions to enroll immediately in college, and 62 percent actually enrolled within one year. By 2005, 70 percent of graduating seniors statewide intended to enroll in college, but only 60 percent enrolled within a year. The college-going rate dipped to a low of 57 percent for the class of 2006, according to the report.

The recent increases in college intentions among Maine's graduating seniors are reflected in many survey and interview findings. For example:

- Community encouragement for college has improved, with 71 percent of parents and 55 percent of young adults agreeing that their community encourages young people to consider college, up from 55 percent and 44 percent, respectively, in 2002.

- About two in five high school educators indicate that their schools have changed academic "tracking" practices in the past five years (potentially allowing more students access to a rigorous curriculum). More on this later.

- More high school students are getting exposure to college through campus visits. Sixty-one percent of students report that their school arranges college campus visits, compared with 45 percent in 2002, and 63 percent report that their parents have taken them to visit a college campus, compared with 55 percent in 2002.

- More schools are embedding career and college planning activities into their day-to-day work.

So why isn't college enrollment growing yet? And why are so many students who do enroll in college failing to continue through to graduation? The study offers insights on this as well:

- Just two in three students are taking advanced math courses in high school. Completing a year of math beyond Algebra 2 is strongly associated with success in college.

- Students' confidence about the financial feasibility of going to college is significantly lower than their college aspirations.

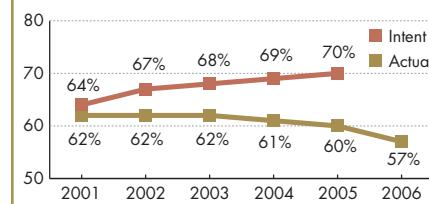
- Many parents (one in three) believe finances will determine whether their child attends college.

- With college aspirations rising, more students who face multiple, significant barriers are hoping to go to college. It may take more time for these students' actual enrollment numbers to match their aspirations.

With regard to tracking, the study found that a student's academic track in school is an even stronger predictor of likely college enrollment than parental education level or family income (factors which themselves correlate with academic track). In particular, students in a "general/vocational" track say they are less challenged in the classroom, receive less encouragement to consider college

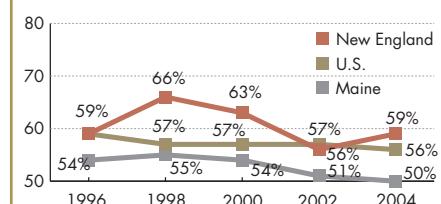
and do not feel as well-prepared for life after high school as students in a "college prep" or "honors/AP" track. Educators report that career planning practices at school are not as effective for general/vocational students as they are for college prep and honors/AP students. While the general/vocational track seems to put students at a disadvantage, being placed in an honors/AP track is a great equalizer; these students are more likely to go

College-Going among Maine High School Graduates



Despite steady increases in the proportion of graduating seniors who told their schools they were planning to enroll in college the next year, actual college enrollment within one year stayed flat, then began to decline.

High School Graduates Going Directly to College



While comparable national data on college intentions are not available, Maine consistently lags behind the United States in college-going. The recent drop in college-going, however, is not unique to Maine. (Maine's percentage is lower here than in the previous figure because it reflects only those students who enroll in college full-time the fall after graduating high school, rather than any enrollment within a full year after graduation.)

to college than others, regardless of their parents' education or income.

But parental educational attainment also has a critical influence on student experience. Students whose parents did not go beyond high school are more likely than others to believe they don't need to go to college to get a good job, for example. And the highest level of education completed by either parent is a stronger predictor of parents' beliefs about the financial feasibility of college for their children than is household income.

Researchers heard loud and clear that Maine families do not know enough about how to pay for college. Students routinely cite finances as the primary barrier to college. But far fewer students complete financial aid applications than are eligible to receive aid. Educators acknowledge that schools are not as effective at helping families understand college finances as they are at informing them about college options.

Based on the findings of the study, the Mitchell Institute has offered several recommendations to close the intentions-enrollment gap. These include:

Ensuring that all students have rigorous educational experiences. Some Maine school districts are increasing graduation requirements and finding that high expectations

such as requiring all students to complete four years of college-preparatory math are improving student engagement rather than leaving students behind. Many are finding that early college or dual-enrollment opportunities for high school students—particularly those who face barriers to college or are uncertain of their aspirations—lead to improved academic performance.

Starting career exploration early.

When students can connect their interests with potential careers, they have a reason to work hard and take tough courses. For example, Central Maine Community College holds a summer camp for 10- to 14-year-olds interested in criminal justice careers. With local police as teachers, campers visit a courtroom, tour a rescue helicopter and participate in a search exercise.

Enlisting colleges. Colleges can serve their surrounding communities by bringing young people onto campus in informal ways. One Bates College administrator brings students from his small town's summer recreation program, many of whom have never been on a college campus, to play in the college gym, talk with students and have lunch in the cafeteria. Maine college students are a largely untapped resource. Many have insights from their own experiences and a genuine interest in helping. Last year, a

Bowdoin College student designed a program as his senior thesis that brought high school juniors from Maine's northernmost county onto the campus overnight, pairing them with students to attend classes and stay in dorm rooms. An initiative at the University of Maine at Farmington links college students with a nearby high school where they serve as tutor-mentors.

Getting businesses involved.

Businesses can bring young people and their teachers into work sites to see what jobs are available in their community and what kinds of skills are expected. They can also view their employees as the parents of the next generation of workers, and help them prepare their children for college by providing financial planning sessions during the workday.

If Maine is to thrive, it needs an educated workforce. That will require continuing to foster college intentions while closing the gap between intentions and enrollment.

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